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Mondale Shifts Strategy, Returns Fire on 'Special-Interest' Charge

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DES MOINES, Oct. 9—Former vice president Walter F. Mondale, in a dramatic shift of strategy, has issued a spirited defense of his endorsement by teachers and organized labor and charged that Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio), not he, has served "special interests."

Angered by growing criticism from rival presidential hopefuls that he has become "the candidate of special interests," Mondale told the annual Iowa Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner Saturday night that Democrats have "a special responsibility" to labor, teachers, women, blacks and the elderly and that, if the party "does not lead the fight for fairness in this country, it will not be done."

Speaking in a hall packed with his supporters, Mondale said each presidential contender must be tested on how he distinguishes "special interests" from "the public interest."

Without mentioning Glenn by name, Mondale suggested that the Ohio Democrat failed the public-interest test by supporting President Reagan's tax and budget cuts and production of nerve gas and by opposing Senate ratification of the SALT II Treaty.

Mondale called Reaganomics "the most radical measure of our time" and "the most comprehensive onslaught against social justice in our time." He said it provided billions of dollars in tax breaks for corporations and "the very wealthiest Americans" but cost millions of Americans their jobs and drove thousands into bankruptcy.

"Of all the measures in modern political history in which the forces of special interests clashed with the profound public interest of our nation, I cannot recall a single instance where the issues were as clear," he told the highly partisan audience of 4,500.

"Even [Office of Management and Budget Director] David Stockman

said, when that bill passed, 'The hogs have been fed,'" Mondale said. "That would have been a good time for a Democrat to stand up against the special interests and vote no."

"I opposed Reaganomics," he added.

Mondale said, "I bled my heart out for SALT II" and noted that it was supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA. "The world needs the ratification of SALT II, and I wish everyone would have voted for it."

The attack by the normally cautious Mondale caught Glenn forces by surprise. Glenn strategists said they viewed it as an act of desperation by a candidate who fears that his once-strong lead is dwindling.

"I think we rattled his cage, and he's striking back," Glenn campaign manager William White said.

Mondale's remarks came after his most successful day of Iowa campaigning. Earlier, he won a surprisingly clear-cut victory in a straw poll conducted at the dinner, defeating runner-up Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) by 47 percent to 37 percent.

He also learned that he leads Glenn by 19 percent in a new Iowa Poll by The Des Moines Register, a 4 percent gain since July, and shows new strength in a race against Reagan in the state. The poll, conducted last week, showed that Glenn or Mondale would beat Reagan by about 10 percentage points in Iowa if the election were held now.

Mondale was the last of seven Democratic presidential hopefuls who spoke at the dinner, the largest fund-raiser ever held in the state, where the presidential delegate selection process begins in February.

Mondale's appearance seemed choreographed like a ballet. He brooded for more than an hour as four of his opponents chastised him for pandering to special interests by accepting recent endorsements from the AFL-CIO and the National Education Association.

Glenn, repeating lines he used in a debate in New York City last week, said the Democratic Party will lose the 1984 election if "we offer a party which can't say no to anyone with a letterhead and a mailing list."

"Will we offer a party that decries the politics of the 1920s and offers as a replacement the policies of the 1960s?" he asked. "If so, we will lose in 1984 just as we did in 1980."

Former Florida governor Reubin Askew was more explicit, indicating that many Americans see the Democratic Party as "increasingly preoccupied with serving only the special interests of various constituency groups."

"What about all the millions of working people who don't belong to labor unions?" he asked. "What about all the women who don't belong to NOW [the National Organization for Women]? What about the the much-discussed but much-neglected middle classes?"

Askew's speech was written to provoke outbursts, and he was hissed and booed when he said the party should not exclude those who oppose legalized abortion, the nuclear freeze and "compulsory unionism."

The hall was packed with union members recruited to vote in the straw poll for Mondale and with supporters of the nuclear freeze favored by Cranston, so Askew's remarks clearly set him apart from the pack.

But they also set up Mondale, who followed him to the podium, for an easy kill. In rapid-fire order, he declared:

"I'm proud to stand with working men and women who want jobs . . . I'm proud to stand with teachers who demand better education for our children . . . I'm proud to go before NOW and say, 'I support ERA.'"

"He took the paint off the walls," Iowa Democratic Chairman David Nagle said afterward.